INNOCENCE[1]

By ROSE WILDER LANE

WHEN Mary Alice came quite awake her mother was rubbing her face with a cold, wet cloth. They were in the little room at the end of the car; the floor was shaking like the skin of a horse that tries to get rid of a fly, and underneath the floor the wheels were talking. Clickety-clack! they said, Clickety-clack!

"Wake up, baby," mother said. "We'll be there in a few minutes." She turned Mary Alice around and began buttoning up. A little light ran along the edge of the shining washbasin. When Mary Alice turned her head the little light ran away very quickly, when she turned her head the other way it stopped suddenly and ran back.

"Stand still dear!" mother said. The best, beautiful pink dress came jerkily down over Mary Alice's head and was buttoned. Then mother turned her around again and pushed into place the thin curved, red comb that held her hair tight. Mother's eyes were clear, like water, and full of happiness. Her two hands gave Mary Alice's face an excited little squeeze.

"We're going to see father and Uncle Charley again. Aren't you glad?" she said.

"Will there be pickaninnies?" Mary Alice asked, anxiously. Pickaninnies were children as black as coal; mother had promised that she would see them in Florida. Mother said yes, there would be pickaninnies.

Mary Alice sat on the chair while mother dressed. When she sat on the edge of the chair her legs disappeared; when she pulled herself back two feet popped up in front of her. That was because her legs bent; her legs had hinges in them, like doors. Mother's hair was very long, and no one could see at once all the lights that scampered through it. Mother's hands were going so fast that they were out of breath, and fluttered. When they

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came to a snarl they jerked at it, but mother never cried. Her face in the glass smiled at Mary Alice.

"You remember Uncle Charley, don't you?" she said.

Mary Alice remembered Uncle Charley. When they lived at grandfather's he used to put her high on the big backs of the horses at the watering trough. She remembered his legs, going into the pile of hay in the car that had taken father and him down south to Florida. First his arms and head went in, and then one leg and then the other, and that was the last of Uncle Charley. Then there was nothing but hay. She must not tell any one that Uncle Charley was in the hay, because they were poor, and if people knew that Uncle Charley was going to Florida with father and the horses and the cows they would not let him go. For a long time Mary Alice had not spoken of Uncle Charley, but she remembered him. He was big and strong and always laughing.

When the train stopped they got down the high car steps and were alone in a gray light. Mother looked anxiously this way and that, and her hand hurt Mary Alice's. Then she dropped it, and father was there. "Hello! Here you are!" he said. He and mother looked at each other, and it was as though they were together in a warm little space. Mary Alice was outside, chilly and uncomfortable. She tugged at mother's sleeve and said, "Where are the pickaninnies?" Then they laughed and took her into the warmth.

"Didn't Charley come?" said mother, and father swung Mary Alice into the air and kissed her. His face was suddenly close and big, a brown, prickly face with deep creases in the cheeks.

The horses and wagon waited by the platform. Mary Alice was swung high over the wheel into the seat, father and mother climbed up beside her, and father clucked to the horses. The horses walked quickly, jerking their heads, and little plops of white dust rose from their feet. They passed a store and some low, unpainted houses with wide porches. Strange trees grew in the yards. Their branches grew as though they meant something strange and frightening; their leaves were like flat green hands with wide fingers, and their fruit was black. In one of these trees was a black boy. He sat on a branch and dangled black legs, and with one hand he picked a black fruit. His large mouth was very full of white teeth, and he bit the black fruit with them; he bit it through, and laughed. Mary Alice could not look away

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from him; her head turned slowly and her eyes stayed fixed on him for a long time.

"Here we are, in the piney woods!" said father. The white road went curving between straight, tall gray trees that had no branches. Far overhead their green-black tops whispered breathlessly, without stopping, telling something terrifying. The gray trunks stood still in a gray light; they knew, but they were silent, and the pale ground looked up at them. A smell of dampness and of wet paintbrushes was in the air.

Father's cheerful voice sounded loud and false. Mother's voice was low and unrelenting, as though she were talking about telling lies. Uncle Charley was her little brother.

"You must must tell me what it is," she said.

Mary Alice watched the horses' ears. They turned this way and that, and reminded Mary Alice of birds sitting on a fence.

Suddenly mother cried out, as though some one had struck her. Mary Alice looked up quickly. Mother's face was broken. Mother was crying, and nothing was safe. Terror and strangeness reached out of the gray woods and seized Mary Alice, and she shrieked, and there was nothing anywhere but sobbing and screams. Father was talking to her, but she could not hear him; and he was holding her, but she could not feel that he was near. Then he was putting something into her hand and telling her to taste it. It was sweet and salty. Sugar cane, he said; she was to suck it. It was smooth and green and round, like a large stick of candy. The wagon was still jolting on, and she sat tasting the sugar cane through her sobs until she fell asleep. She fell asleep feeling a blackness of something that had got Uncle Charley and made mother cry.

But when she woke there he was. His big hands were holding her in the air, and he was laughing up at her. His face was red-brown and his eyes were very blue, and beneath the edge of his blue shirt was the strip of pinky-white skin; he had just come in from the fields and was putting her up on the big horse. No, there was the wagon and a strange zigzag fence and many large, fresh chips scattered around a new house in the piney woods. She was in Florida, and Uncle Charley was here, too, and safe.

"Oh!" she cried, hugging his neck tight. "Mother cried about you, and I was afraid!"

The last sob came unexpectedly out of her throat, and then

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she felt a queer stillness. She slid to the ground. There was a strange woman, a black-haired, black-eyed, red-cheeked woman in a beautiful, bright-red dress. She was fascinating, like grandfather's big brown horse that lived behind bars and had once killed a man.

"This is your new Aunt Molly, Mary Alice," said mother. Mother's face was smiling, but mother was not smiling. Mary Alice took tight hold of mother's brown skirt and held out a hand.

"How do you do, Aunt Molly?" she said, carefully.

"The other hand, dear," said mother.

Mary Alice saw Aunt Molly's bare feet, bare and brown and dusty with white dust. She looked up the beautiful red skirt to Aunt Molly's hands that were on Aunt Molly's hips, and on up to the bright-colored face. The face tipped back, a thick, white throat came up out of the red collar, and suddenly Aunt Molly laughed a short, queer laugh.

"Well, nyow," she said, "I'm right proud to meet you," and she shook Mary Alice's hand as though she were making fun. But it was the right hand. Aunt Molly's red lips curled and showed her white teeth; she was like the big brown horse laying back his ears, and Mary Alice backed quickly against mother. Everything was wrong and she did not know why; she only wanted to get away, and, turning, she hid her face against mother and shut her eyes.

Then they were all going into the house. The house was made of new yellow boards and smelled good. There was a room with a cook stove and table, and a room with the big bed and Mary Alice's cot. It was a nice house, only Uncle Charley did not live with them any more. He lived in another house with Aunt Molly. Aunt Molly took him away, and at the gate he stopped to look back at mother. Mother and Mary Alice stood in the doorway and waved good-by to Uncle Charley, but Aunt Molly did not look back. She walked fast down the road, and her red skirt switched behind her like a tail.

Mother was very busy and did not say a word. She unpacked the trunk and put on her blue apron and let down the long braid of her hair that stayed in a knot only when she was playing grown-up. For mother was not really grown-up, like father; she liked to sing and dress dolls and play games with toes. Only to-day she did not feel like playing. She bathed

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Mary Alice sternly in the tin washbasin, and swept, and got supper. Her forehead was pulled into little lumps, and her mouth was queer and tight. When father came in from doing the chores she dished up the potatoes and cut the johnnycake and set Mary Alice on the Bible in the chair without saying anything until father put his arms around her, and then she cuddled her head beside his chin and cried again.

"Oh, how could he? How could he?" she said.

"He didn't do it," said father, bitterly. "He's a Northerner and she wanted him. She got around him somehow. They say she drugged him."

Mary Alice sat amazed, holding her knife straight up in her fist. "Drugged," she said to herself. "Dragged. I drug; I dragged. She dragged herself around him. She drugged herself around him." It made a song in her mind and she began to sing it, pounding on the table with the handle of the knife, until mother startled her with a sharp, "Stop it, Mary Alice!"

Mary Alice went to sleep every night hearing the piney woods whispering together, and when she woke in her cot they were still whispering. The piney woods had no leaves, only long things like red and brown darning needles. She must not go far from the house—there were snakes in the piney woods. She might go with mother to bring water from the spring. The water came out in the ground and made a little pool that twisted in the middle, then it ran stealthily away into shadows. The air was thick and moldy with smells, and by the water grew a fascinating horrible plant that ate flies.

Uncle Charley came every day to help father dig a well outside the kitchen door. He was busy and did not feel like playing. He dug himself down to the waist and then down to the shoulders, and then he went down into the ground in a bucket on a rope. He sent up the bucket full of red mud, and father dumped it. Mary Alice played with the mud and made things; she set them in a row in the sun and they turned to rock. Mother said she was making mud pies, but they were not pies, they were just shapes she thought of. At noon Uncle Charley came out of the ground and washed and ate dinner. He said it was like old times to eat honest-to-gosh cooking again, and mother looked sad. Uncle Charley should not say honest-to-gosh; it was a bad word.

"Will you stay to supper, Charley?" mother said.

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Uncle Charley made marks with his toe in the red mud. "Hang it all! yes," he said.

After supper he sat with father on the doorstep and mother sat near them in the rocking-chair and sang songs to them; they forgot it was bedtime. Aunt Molly came up the road in the moonlight, her face and her arms and her feet were white in the moonlight, and she stood at the edge of the piney woods and called:

"Charley!"

Mother asked her to come in, but she said, "No thanks; I reckon we-all'll be gitting along home."

Uncle Charley did not come any more to dig, and father and mother talked about it. Mother said they must be nice to Aunt Molly. She did not want to, but she pinned up her hair and put on her sunbonnet and she and Mary Alice went up the white road. Sunshine slanted through the piney woods and struck the white road. Lizards lay on the zigzag fence waggling their sleek throats, and ants went across the road in crawling lines, little red lines and big black lines. White dust was on the toes of Mary Alice's little shoes and mother's big shoes.

They came to Uncle Charley's house. It was made of logs, and skins were spread out on the walls. The ground around it was bare and hard and hens were walking about. Large bony dogs with flapping ears stood up and growled, but Aunt Molly came to the door and said:

"Hesh up, you ornery dawgs! I'm right proud to see you-all," she said, looking at mother's calico dress. "We-all ain't fine like Northerners, but sech as we got is good enough for we-uns. Light 'n' come in."

Mother laughed as though she had been running; she said polite things while they went into the house. It was logs on the inside, too, and bits of daylight came through between them. Women and many children were sitting around the fireplace. They were all bare-footed and wore queer gray dresses, and they all looked at mother's dress and at Mary Alice's shoes. A woman put out a long skinny arm and pulled Mary Alice close to her. The woman's face was all deep-brown wrinkles and her chewing mouth was somehow like a frog jumping.

"Nyow, here's a right peart little girl," she said. "I'd give a pretty for a little girl like you."

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Mary Alice shyly said nothing, leaning against the woman's friendly knee.

Aunt Molly sat on her heels by the fireplace, mixing cornmeal and water with her fingers. She took handfuls of it and patted them flat between her hands; she made a print of her hands on each side. Mary Alice admired it very much. Then Aunt Molly laid the yellow cake in the ashes and covered it with ashes and made another.

Each woman had only one or two long yellow teeth, but they never stopped brushing them. They dipped little sticks into boxes of brown dust, and chewed, and spit into the fireplace. Mary Alice had never seen any one spit so far and so well. There was a box on the knee beside her, and she looked into it, politely. The woman understood; she dipped her stick into the box and twirled it until it was brown, and offered it to Mary Alice. Mary Alice took it eagerly, but mother's eyes opened wide, and then she shook her head.

"She's too little yet, I'm afraid," mother said, and her blue eyes were very blue in her pink face. "Thank the lady nicely, and put it back, Mary Alice," and mother looked around at the faces timidly.

"My childern's dipped snuff sence they was weanlings," said the woman.

Mary Alice wanted to cry, but she let the woman take back the stick. Aunt Molly stood up, and made again that frightening sound like a laugh. Mary Alice felt queer, as though she were big and mother little and something wanted to hurt mother; she went and stood with her back against mother.

The men came tramping in. They were Aunt Molly's brothers —tall, loud men, even bigger than Uncle Charley. They hung their guns on the wall and were noisy; they slapped their big hands on Aunt Molly's shoulders, and she laughed. Aunt Molly's black eyes seemed hot, her black hair was alive. It did not hang limp like the other women's, but each lock of it curled and twisted into the air. She did not look at Uncle Charley, and he did not speak to mother. All the women sat by the fire while the men ate, and Aunt Molly went back and forth with dishes. When her feet touched the floor they seemed to bound. The corn cakes smelled good and Mary Alice was hungry, but she was afraid of the big men, and even mother seemed strange.

Uncle Charley was the last of the men to go. He stood in the

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doorway turning his hat in his fingers and not looking at anybody. Then he went away and all the women got up and began putting the children on the benches by the table and finding places themselves. Some one filled Mary Alice's tin dish with grease and meat and corn cake; there was a confusing noise of voices and tin cups rattling, a woman slapped a boy and he howled, and suddenly Mary Alice cried:

"I don't want nasty black things to eat with! Why aren't they white, mother, like ours?"

Everybody looked at her, and mother reached down and took her under one arm and carried her out of the house; Mary Alice did not know why. Mother did not listen to anything she said; mother set her down hard and held her head under one arm and lifted up her skirts and struck her from behind. Mary Alice yelled with amazement and terror. Mother struck her more than once, and then said:

"Now come in this house, and eat, and don't let me hear another word out of you!"

Mary Alice sat bowed on the bench and swallowed as much as she could. She was most miserable. Afterward they went home, and all down the white road Mary Alice did not say anything, only she looked up at mother now and then and felt confused. When they got home she hurried into the house and sat alone in a corner, holding her rag doll.

The days were forlorn. Uncle Charley did not come, father did not laugh, and mother never tickled toes any more when she pulled the covers off the cot in the mornings. Father had finished the well; there was no more red clay, and in the yard there were only lizards and ants to watch.

One night Mary Alice had a dream. She dreamed that some one came tapping at the door in the night. Father said, "Who's there?" and Uncle Charley's voice answered, very low. Father got up and lighted the lamp in the kitchen and mother got up. Mary Alice thought she sat up in bed and looked through the door into the kitchen.

Mother's long braid hung down her wrapper, and mother said to father: "No! I won't do it, Howard. Everything we own in the world is in this farm. You won't be driven off it while I have anything to say about it."

Father's wrinkles were deep black marks on his face above the lamp. He said, "Well, but Mary—"

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"I don't believe it, anyway!" mother said. "She couldn't hate us like that. What have we ever done to her?"

Uncle Charley's voice was there, but Mary Alice could not see Uncle Charley. Mother turned quickly and spoke toward the voice.

"Well, why don't you?" she said. "You don't belong with such people. You used to be the finest boy in Webster County, and what's she doing to you? You know it isn't true; you know I've never said a word to turn you against her, but I say it now. Yes, leave her! Married or not married, there's some things wrong in the sight of God. If you'll come with us, Charley, we'll go. We'll go back home."

Then Mary Alice heard the piney woods whispering, and she was frightened and cold and wanted to call to mother, but did not dare.

Uncle Charley said, "It's too late, Mary."

Mother said: "It isn't too late. Yes, I say it. I don't care if you'd married her twenty times—"

Then Uncle Charley said a strange thing. He said: "Mary, you don't know—you don't know what she'd do. The moon's shining." Mother's face went all still and hard in the lamplight. Then she was out of sight, and Mary Alice heard her crying voice, "Oh, Charley, don't! don't!" and a terrible hoarse, gasping sound. Father coughed, and then he grew very large and very small and the terrible sounds went on and on, until Mary Alice opened her eyes. The sounds were only the whispering of the piney woods and mother was combing her hair in the morning.

"Where is Uncle Charley?" said Mary Alice. "Mother, is the moon shining?"

"What do you mean?" mother exclaimed. "You've been dreaming, Mary Alice. Nobody's been here. Moonshining is a bad word. You must never say it again." Mary Alice's bewilderment opened her mouth, but mother was so stern that she closed it again.

After breakfast mother took Mary Alice between her knees and spoke to her seriously. "I want you to listen to me, Mary Alice," she said. "You must never eat anything that any one gives you. Never eat anything until I give it to you, or father. Do you understand?"

"Oh, mother," said Mary Alice, "aren't you ever going to tickle my toes again, ever, ever, any more?"

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Mother scrunched her up tight in her warm, clean-smelling calico lap and arms, laughing and catching her breath. But in a minute she was stern again. "Listen, dear. You must never, never eat anything until I say you may. Do you understand? Tell me, Mary Alice."

"I must never eat anything until you say I may," said Mary Alice, remembering hard. And next morning mother tickled her toes, but it was not as it used to be, and Mary Alice did not want mother to do it because she was asked.

One could play in the garden, putting the peanut blossoms to bed. Mary Alice had carefully picked up the peanut blossoms and dusted them, until father found her doing it. He laughed then, and called mother to laugh, too. Peanut blossoms must dig down into the ground to make peanuts. So now she put them in little holes and buried them—the peanut blossoms were glad because she was helping them.

"Well, I guess we'll have to live on the peanuts," father said. The cow was dead. He had found her in the piney woods with her legs cut, so he had had to kill her, and there would not be any little calf. Mother looked sick. She said: "How can human beings do such things! But I won't back down for them," she said; "it's like going away and leaving Charley."

There were no more peanut blossoms. Under the ground there were peanuts, and father was digging them up; some day mother would roast them. The banana plant in the yard had grown taller than Mary Alice; its broad leaves hung limp and warm in the sun. Beneath it on the ground a moth fluttered; it was alive, but it was covered with ants. The ants were eating it. Mary Alice got a grass stem and fought them. She poked them off as fast as she could, but they kept coming, and the poor moth fluttered. She must not touch moths, a touch brushed the weeny little feathers off their wings, and hurt them. Mary Alice fought the ants as fast as she could, but in a moment the moth jerked, twisted up its legs, and died. Mary Alice stood up. Aunt Molly was leaning on the fence, watching her from the shadows of a sunbonnet. She did not speak, but beckoned with her hand.

"See what I've fetched you, honey," she said, like a secret. She uncurled her fingers, and on her palm was a little red ball. "It's spruce gum," she said. "It grows in the piney woods. Your aunt Molly's fetched it and chawed it all soft for you."

She felt warm and grateful toward Aunt Molly. But Aunt

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Molly's eyes were strange; their look came out of them and pushed Mary Alice's gaze down. She could not look at Aunt Molly. She turned the red ball over in her hand.

"Chaw it," said Aunt Molly. "Chaw it."

It was only to chaw; it was not something to eat. Mary Alice lifted it to her mouth, and then took it down and looked at it again. But it was not to eat. The screen door slammed, and she looked up guiltily.

"Mother, see!" she said. "See what Aunt Molly gave me! Mother, can I eat it? It's gum."

Mother looked at Aunt Molly. Aunt Molly stood up straight, and the sunbonnet fell back; her face came out hard and bright, and she smiled at mother.

"Yes, Mary Alice, you may have it," said mother, and just as joy leaped in Mary Alice, mother's hand came down quickly and took the red ball. "After supper," she said.

Mary Alice looked up, protesting, and was struck silent. Something vast and terrible was there, in the air, invisible, coming out of the eyes of Aunt Molly and mother. Mary Alice's legs stumbled as mother led her by the hand into the house.

Mother sat down and took Mary Alice into her lap. She rocked her for a while and then said:

"Mary Alice, I promised you the gum, and mother always keeps her promises. The gum is yours. Will you give it to me for a pan of peanuts?"

Mary Alice thought. She thought of the red ball, how good it looked, and she thought of hot, crackling peanuts.

"A large pan?" she asked.

"The black baking pan," said mother.

"All right," said Mary Alice. Mother got the black baking pan and filled it with peanuts. She put the pan in the oven and shut the oven door. Then she went out. Mary Alice sat on a stool and waited. She looked at the sunshine on the floor and at the ironing board laid on the backs of the two chairs; she heard the piney woods whispering, and the safe sound of the teakettle. Now and then she sniffed. She smelled the peanuts. She smelled them very loud. She began to smell them anxiously; they smelled burning. She was trying to open the oven door when suddenly some one seized her. Mother had her tight; mother was shaking and sobbing and laughing, her face was wet and twisted against Mary Alice's. Mary Alice shrieked aloud and struggled, screaming.

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Father came in, running, the hoe in his hand. Mother cried: "She died! She's dead!" and laughed horribly.

Father shook them both. "O my God! O my God! What is it?" he said. "Answer me!"

Mother stumbled across the floor, carrying Mary Alice to the doorway. Outside, on the stain of red mud, the Plymouth Rock hen lay dead with her head on.

"I threw it to her, and she swallowed it, and died," said mother.

And Mary Alice sincerely wept, because she had liked the hen, too. Father and mother comforted her, and talked over her head.

There was no supper that night. Mary Alice was given a piece of bread and butter, and she was not to be put to bed. Father had hitched up the horses, and they were going back to grandfather's. Trunks and boxes were packed and piled in the wagon, with the stove and table and chairs and the sacks of peanuts. As soon as it was dark they started.

The piney woods were shadowy in the moonlight and things without shapes moved through them; the horses' feet made dull thudding sounds and the wagon creaked, the harness jingled. They had gone a long way, but Mary Alice was still awake when the horses shied and some one was holding on to the wheel and looking upward.

"Good-by!" Uncle Charley panted. "I just made it in time across the hill way. I thought I'd get there and fight 'em with you. But it's better for you this way. Don't stop. Keep going. They'll be at the house in half an hour. Good-by."

Mother leaned down to him. "Get in and come with us," she said. "Oh, Charley, how'll I ever stand it? We'll get you off, somehow, Charley. I can't go away and leave you here."

The piney woods were still, listening.

"God! Mary, I can't," Uncle Charley said. "You don't know her. She's got me. She'd have the revenuers after me to-morrow. I—I 'ain't got the nerve, any more. You better hurry on. Good-by. I— Good-by, Mary!"

Then he was gone, and father put his arm around mother and clucked to the horses. Mary Alice thought at first that mother was crying, but she was not; she was quite still.

"Aren't we going to see Uncle Charley again?" Mary Alice asked.

"Hush, Mary Alice!" said father.

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The piney woods were filled with strangeness; the gray, straight trunks moved stealthily, and the road was a glimmer that went out in darkness ahead. But Mary Alice slipped away from all vague wonderings into the coziness of sleep.

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